Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Culture, Health & Sexuality

An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care

ISSN: 1369-1058 (Print) 1464-5351 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tchs20

BDSM, becoming and the flows of desire

Charlotta Carlström

To cite this article: Charlotta Carlström (2018): BDSM, becoming and the flows of desire, Culture, Health & Sexuality, DOI: 10.1080/13691058.2018.1485969

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2018.1485969

Published online: 24 Jul 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 6

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=tchs20

CULTURE, HEALTH & SEXUALITY, 2018
https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2018.1485969

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

BDSM, becoming and the flows of desire

Charlotta Carlström

Centre for Sexology and Sexuality Studies, Faculty of Health and Society, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Based on a five-year qualitative ethnographic study of Bondage and Discipline/Dominance and Submission/Sadism and Masochism (BDSM) in Sweden, this paper examines the process of becoming among BDSM practitioners. In-depth interviews were completed with 29 self-defined BDSM practitioners, and their accounts were analysed using thematic analysis. Focusing on the Deleuzian concept of becoming, BDSM is understood as a dynamic and collective phenomenon closely connected to fantasies, memories and longing, and enabled through flows of desire. Practising BDSM can be understood as a process of increasing expansion, creation and connection, in which desire is seen not as something we lack or need but rather as a process of striving and self-enhancement. Exploring the becoming process more fully can provide a better understanding as to why some people choose to practise BDSM.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 26 February 2018
Accepted 5 June 2018

KEYWORDS
BDSM; desire; becoming; ethnography; sexual behaviour; Sweden

Introduction

This paper explores BDSM practitioners' narratives of their first attraction to these practices, and how they give meaning to their experiences. Individual narratives are analysed in dialogue with Deleuze and Guattari's ([1987] 2012) approach to desire, while the transformative potential of *becoming* is used as a conceptual lens through which to probe more deeply into the significance of these accounts.

BDSM stands for 'bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism', and the acronym has largely replaced the earlier term 'sadomasochism'. The literary depiction of sadomasochism has a long and rich history, with examples from both Eastern and Western civilisations, while the scholarly study of these practices is comparatively recent (Westerfelhaus 2007). The terms sadism and masochism were first coined by Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902) in his extensive work *Psychopathia Sexualis*, published in 1886. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) subsequently brought together the two concepts to form *sadomasochism*. Noticing that a person could experience pleasure from both receiving and inflicting pain, Freud drew the conclusion that sadism and masochism were two sides of the same coin (Weinberg 2006). The conceptualisation was further developed by the anthropologist Paul Gebhard (1969), who stressed that to experience or inflict pain per se is not attractive to BDSM practitioners, unless it occurs in an arranged situation. However, it is from

CONTACT Charlotta Carlström charlotta.carlstrom@mau.se

© 2018 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

the 1970s onwards that sociological research of BDSM as a collective, consenting and social behaviour has progressed and diversified.

BDSM is organised in environments with shared rules, values and norms that members must adhere to. Social events are based on interaction and ritual practices in social contexts including clubs, private parties, pub evenings or workshops, where practitioners meet to socialise, learn and practise BDSM. People practising BDSM often describe the BDSM 'community' as important to them, because it adds meaning and offers security and a sense of belonging. Continuity and mutual recognition are arguably crucial factors in providing this sense of security. At the same time, it should be stressed that a minority, or a self-defined group such as a BDSM community, does not constitute a fixed identity. It can be reformed, and the community can jointly create new ideas about what identity is and should contain at a given moment. Deleuze and Guattari ([1987] 2012) argue that the identity of a group is set in motion with every new member, something that becomes obvious within the BDSM community, where there is a constant influx of new people. Darkside.se – the main BDSM platform in Sweden – has increased from about 30,000 to almost 200,000 members over a nine-year period (October 2009 to April 2018).

While earlier theories supposed that prior childhood sexual abuse might account for adult participation in BDSM, several empirical studies show that BDSM cannot be explained in terms of psychopathology (Langdridge and Barker 2007; Sandnabba et al. 2002; Weinberg 2006; Williams 2006; Williams et al. 2017). In contrast to pathologising discourses, some studies point to the psychological benefits for people who engage in BDSM (see, for example, Richters et al. 2008; Wismeijer and van Assen 2013). In Wismeijer and van Assen's study from the Netherlands, for instance, 902 BDSM practitioners scored significantly higher than matched controls of 434 persons on several measures associated with psychological health. The authors commented that BDSM should be understood in terms of recreational activity rather than as a form of psychopathology. Ranging from exploration of the spiritual to the therapeutic, research by Beckmann (2001), Taylor and Ussher (2001) and Barker, Iantaffi, and Gupta (2007) reported positive psychological outcomes for participants engaging in BDSM.

This trend away from pathologising discourses is also demonstrated by the diversification in research focus. In recent years, studies have looked at a variety of dimensions of the practices, notably issues of communication, negotiation and consent (Langdridge and Barker 2007; Moser and Kleinplatz 2006; Ortmann and Sprott 2013; Weiss 2011), personal meaning in relation to BDSM (Faccio, Casini, and Cipolletta 2014), gender and BDSM (Barker 2013; Carlström 2017; Yost 2007), BDSM as leisure (Newmahr 2011; Prior and Williams 2015; Williams et al. 2016) and BDSM as a ritual and spiritual practice (Baker 2016; Carlström 2018; Klement et al. 2016; Sagarin, Lee, and Klement 2015). The present study adds to the existing multidisciplinary literature and takes its point of departure in theoretical reflections on desire as a fundamental force in life. Focusing on the concepts of *becoming* and *desire*, I explore how practitioners give meaning to their own experiences.

Method

The paper is based on a five-year qualitative ethnographic study of BDSM conducted in Sweden (Carlström 2016). Data were collected within different BDSM communities between 2012 and 2013. To identify participants, I combined a variety of approaches: I advertised in a sex shop, contacted various non-profit organisations working on sexual issues and for the

rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and informed them about the research project. I also became a member of Darkside.se where I advertised the research study. Ethnographic research aims at getting close to the informants and uncovering phenomena, but also serves to study the complexity and dynamics in different situations. In the present study, the fieldwork included interviews, observation and participation in meetings, home parties, pub evenings and club activities. I attended various workshops focusing on whip technique and/or security, for example. At parties and clubs, there are opportunities to role-play and practise BDSM, and I regularly participated in such events. I also visited practitioners in their homes to reach an understanding of how BDSM permeates everyday life. The observations served several purposes. I wanted people to get to know me and, in that way, create trust. I also wanted to learn more about interaction patterns and norms within the BDSM community, which was difficult to achieve through interviews alone. Finally, my observations helped develop relevant questions for subsequent interviews.

In total, 29 persons, defining themselves as BDSM practitioners, were interviewed. The in-depth interviews started with questions about how informants defined BDSM, and how they initially got involved. My intention was to enable people to feel free to discuss the subjects they felt were most important to them. The interviews were conducted in informants' homes, in a sex shop, at cafés and at universities. In this paper, I use pseudonyms to help protect informants' identities. Each interview lasted 1–4 h. Fourteen persons from the sample identified themselves as women, 14 as men and one as transgender. Nine identified as dominant and/or sadists, 13 as submissive and/or masochists and seven as switches. Twenty of the informants had a university education. My contact with informants varied: I met some of them only once for an interview; others I got to know very well and met several times in different contexts for repeated interviews. These informants helped me gain access to different events and put me in contact with others.

The theoretical framing I had initially chosen was modified in the course of the study, based on some of the findings that emerged. In the analysis, I have repeatedly modified the use of the theoretical concepts in a dialectical relationship with my observations and the stories of the informants. In this study, the analytical categories were interpreted through the theoretical concepts of *becoming* and *desire* (Deleuze 1990; Deleuze and Guattari [1987] 2012) to explore dimensions of transgression and re-negotiation of identities that appeared in the interviews. In line with their arguments, I see the individual as dynamic and becoming.

Theoretical framework

Deleuze and Guattari argue that life itself is 'becoming' and see desire as a productive and creative energy, consisting of constant change, power and difference ([1972] 1983; [1987] 2012). This stance can be contrasted with the traditional view of there being a fixed human essence, which then differs by race, class and gender. By avoiding the use of concepts understood as 'being', and instead conceptualising situations in terms of becoming, Deleuze and Guattari believe it is possible to stop thinking and tackling life in fixed and immobile terms. The problem, according to Deleuze (1990), is that becoming always has to be directed towards a given subject. Instead of thinking that there are 'first existences' that then 'act', he contends that we should use the terms in an infinitive form: to be, to practise and to sexualise.

Inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, Colebrook (2002, xv) writes: 'What something is, is its flow of desire, and such forces produce diverging and multiple relations. My body is "female", for example, through its desire for other bodies; one produces one's sexuality through desire.' The body becomes only through its relationships; we become humans when we experience other bodies like us. In line with Foucault's concept of power, *desire* makes it possible to think about events and relationships as productive. Deleuze and Guattari ([1987] 2012) thereby distance themselves from psychoanalytic theory in which desire is seen as something we need to suppress or tame to become civilised. Instead, humans, societies, cultures, discourses and performances are taken to be effects and products of desires. Life itself is desire in which identities and beliefs are understood as events within the flow of desires. Expansion and creation occur through connections. Desire means connection. One way to think about this is to examine the interconnections between different factors: fingers connecting to a keyboard, a body connecting to another body, a mouth connecting to a glass and a bee connecting to a flower.

Often we think of desire in terms of deficiency: if we desire something, it is because we lack it. But Deleuze reconfigures the concept of desire by contending that what we desire is a social formation, and in this sense, desire is always positive. Rather than seeing desire as the effect of something we are lacking, we can instead see it as a creative process, permeating everyday life (Deleuze and Guattari [1972] 1983). Cameron and Kulick (2003) have also been interested in identifying desire and 'analysing its working in particular social landscapes' (113). In their eclectic analysis, desire is not conscious and rational, but consists partly of the subconscious. By focusing on desire, Cameron and Kulick contend that we can provide an analysis of 'the extent to which our erotic lives are shaped by forces which are not wholly rational and of which we are not fully conscious' (107).

Findings

The becoming of the collective and of the individual

BDSM was generally described by the informants as complex and dynamic, rather than static. In their reflections, the practices are also frequently described in terms of *becoming*. Several informants talked about when they first came into contact with BDSM and how the practice has evolved since. A dominant man, Jonathan, reflecting upon the becoming process remarked:

> It (BDSM) has evolved from just being a set of emotions that I could not put words into being an important part of my personality. In the beginning, I did not understand why I felt the way I did. I did not know if it was okay with the surrounding world, or even if it was okay with me. I did not know that there were others just like me. I have gone from seeing my sexual preference as something strange that should be avoided to welcoming it. This has, in turn, led me to allow myself to see the full range of my preferences, and that I can appreciate all aspects of BDSM.

To begin to practise and to become a 'practitioner' is a process comprising several steps. Many practitioners described a sexual-identity development marked by internal conflicts, lack of confidence and feelings of shame in connection to their BDSM practices. For some practitioners, BDSM was not only about sexuality. Instead, power exchange, discipline and security were key factors, where the significance of consent is central. There was a preoccupation, particularly among BDSM couples, with finding and shaping strategies to manage and balance BDSM practice in relation to the surrounding community, and in everyday life.

Almost all interviewed practitioners had a first memory that they associated with BDSM. For many, the discovery was intertwined with a specific event, usually far back in time, yet easily to find in memory. For many also, it involved a flashback to childhood. Kate said: 'I have had these feelings and fantasies as long as I can remember, even before I knew that sex existed and what it was about'. Anders's first memories of BDSM come from school. He remarked:

> I had quite explicit fantasies about my elementary school teacher, she was very foxy. She was newly graduated and had a determined manner, but it didn't scare me. I remember thinking, what if I could get control over her instead. I had quite explicit fantasies about how I rapped her with a ruler.

Recurrent stories concerned the discovery of a BDSM interest through various childhood games. The informants told of games of cops and robbers, and cowboys and Indians, including restraining, bondage and wrestling. Adam, who defined himself as a submissive and masochist, reflected on how his childhood games had BDSM-like elements, and that he was always the one who was caught and exposed:

> When you start connecting stuff you will sooner or later think: 'Hey, wait a minute, why was it always me who was the Indian being captured by the cowboys'? And I realise it now. I was always the one who got caught; I was always the one who was exposed to stuff. But at the time it was not sexual, it was natural. So maybe it is congenital, but I think it's also the environment that shapes us.

Here, Adam describes how, although the childhood games did not happen in a sexual context, adult BDSM roles were formed in relation to these games. Like Adam, Kim remembered childhood role-playing: 'Me and a friend of mine always played zebra and lion when we were kids. It was a game where one of us was in a vulnerable position and the other would attack, we wrestled, and the game always ended when the zebra died'. In a later exploration of BDSM, Kim explains how hir (hir is a gender-neutral third-person singular object pronoun) is always going back to the feeling hir had in the zebra and lion-game: namely, to be in a vulnerable position with the knowledge that something will happen, but you do not know exactly what. Many practitioners said it was only in their teenage years that the games got connected to a sexual preference. This led to a search for information and like-minded people. Karin says: 'Since I was 14, I have had very clear fantasies. I found Darkside when I was 17, that's seven years ago now'. Informants who were teenagers before the emergence of the Internet explained the difficulty of obtaining knowledge and getting in touch with other practitioners. Magnus said:

> Until I was 16, I thought I was abnormal. I grew up in a small town, where everyone knew everyone. Then, one day, I saw a magazine in the library that had a theme issue on bondage and sadomasochism. It was only then I realised and found words for it. I remember thinking: My God, there are others like me. It was awesome.

For another informant, Mattias, it took a long time before he dared to live out his BDSM preferences: 'I never took the step to try anything because I didn't know anybody who liked BDSM. Therefore, I have lived alone with these feelings for about 20 years. Tragic but true'. He contacted a miss (dominatrix) online and booked a date. They met up in a café to talk. An hour later, Mattias went to her studio. He continued: 'I had no idea what activities I was expecting, which made me a little nervous, I was so inexperienced. But during that session, at least 20 barriers were released. Barriers I had had for so many years'.

Processes of becoming can thus take very different pathways. While Mattias faced several difficulties in connecting to his preferences, Anders had practised BDSM during his entire adult life and had fantasised about BDSM since he was six or seven years old. He talked about when he met his current partner:

> I wanted to be very clear about who I was. I wanted to introduce BDSM slowly, so she would understand what it meant. I wrote her a long letter and explained who I was and told her which things I could not sacrifice or change, such as my orientation. And this was a bit like Carl Jonas Love Almqvist; Is it all right? And it was all right.

When describing the kind of relationship, he wanted to have, Anders alluded to the famous and (for its time) feminist and controversial novella *Det går an* (It will do, Almqvist [1839] 2012). Anders is in other words trying to describe a relationship that does not fit into the societal normative frame. For him, BDSM was an orientation, and to begin a new relationship, he needed to know if his partner accepted this part of his identity. She did, and today they live as a couple.

The above examples represent some of the initial memories of BDSM that practitioners talked about in the course of this study. There are many similarities and patterns in these memory stories. For Deleuze and Guattari ([1972] 1983), life means desire, and a flow of positive difference and becoming that occurs in a series of productive interconnections. All becoming, and all actions happen in a flow of life. They can only exist through a chain of desire in which one is connected to the other. It is only by the interconnections that the flow continues. The intensities of the bodies are becoming only through desire, which also interconnects them. When Adam was the Indian who was captured by cowboys, a connection occurred that led to a new becoming. When Kim was the zebra who became trapped by a lion, there was a connection, which was a first link in a chain of flows of desire. In the moment when Mattias's body was connected with the body of a professional domina, he constituted himself as a BDSM practitioner, which meant that '20 barriers were released'. In Jonathan's citation, we can see a clear becoming process from a starting point where 'BDSM was just a set of emotions I could not put into words'.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, such becoming processes are created through flows of desires, fantasies, memories and longing. Jonathan had, in the process of becoming a practitioner, come to meet other practitioners. But other connections are also essential, such as the interconnection that happens when fingers touch the keyboard in a search on the Internet, when a reader meets a text and the connections between hands and other parts of the body and BDSM tools. All such connections entail the important links or flows in the process of becoming a practitioner and continuing to be one. We never stop becoming, but at the same time, life itself consists of a single becoming. Even the practitioners who saw BDSM as innate and as 'something that has always been there' go through these becoming processes. Events, such as meetings with other practitioners, the first session, the purchase of tools and devices, the exploration of new practices, conditions and pleasures, are all examples of flows of desire that involve a process of expansion and creation.

The becoming process also includes relating to prevailing discourses. In some of the informants' accounts, earlier destructive experiences are reproduced, and these are followed by reflections on whether these experiences are related to the BDSM practices of the present moment. Jenny, a submissive woman, said:

> I'm thinking a lot about what has happened earlier in my life, if there is any connection to why I am practising BDSM. I think a lot about it. I lost my virginity through rape. But I have worked it

> through and it is all right now. And then, my son's father was very ... He was not so kind, mentally. It was abuse. It was nothing I wanted. There's a difference when it is sexual. And then I think, how have those experiences affected me? I have learnt to live with it and it is okay now. It's nothing I weep over now, or what can I say.

Jonathan also reflected on the connections between abuse and BDSM:

> In the beginning, when I rather was afraid of my orientation than welcomed it, I thought it was a product of growing up in a home where there was abuse, primarily of me. It is so easy to draw that conclusion, but I can't subscribe to it. Everything I do in BDSM comes from desire and love. There is no violence, bitterness or hate to be found. Only desire and will. I am a kind and caring person who would never dream of abusing, hitting or hurting anyone in other ways. However, that is a product of the home I grew up in. Strangely enough.

Jonathan sid that it is 'easy to draw the conclusion', referring to the possible conclusion that practising BDSM may be an effect of growing up in an abusive home, but he believed that his preferences are not actually caused by these childhood experiences. Both Jenny's and Jonathan's views of themselves were affected by discourses that connected BDSM to violence and with past traumatic experiences. Although several major research studies (see, for example, Richters et al. 2008; Wismeijer and van Assen 2013) conclude that there is no necessary connection to destructive past experiences, nor mental illness associated with the practice, several informants reflect on and relate BDSM to mental illness when they describe their trajectories. It is obvious that the discourse of BDSM as pathology is still prevalent. As Langdridge (2011, 374) points out: 'The power of medicine to pathologise has long been recognised, and this is particularly apparent with sadomasochism, where the voice of the participant has been drowned out by the voice of the medical professional'.

Research shows that people who practise BDSM do not suffer from mental illness to a greater extent than the general population, but it is of course important to be aware that mental ill health can be present among BDSM practitioners. Equally important is not to jump to conclusions concerning mechanisms or causalities. A mental illness depends on different things, but one reason may be exposure to stigma. Kleinplatz and Moser (2007, 60) emphasise: 'Individuals who are labelled and treated as mentally ill are entitled to feel significant distress about perceptions of them; that distress does not signify psychopathology per se'. To be stigmatised and treated as mentally ill or perverse, can by itself lead to mental illness.

Flows of desire

Foucault ([1979] 2002) describes how sexual orientation came to play an important role in shaping the identity of individuals. It was not until the twentieth century, however, that sexuality became an identity-based notion. Before that, sexuality was understood as based on acts. Weiss (2011, 11) suggests seeing BDSM as an 'identity in practice, a deeply personal yet relational project of self', which implies that many practitioners see BDSM as something they do, rather than something they are.

The distinction between 'being' and 'doing' was common among the practitioners I interviewed. Sofia, for example, said that 'BDSM is something I do, and dominant is something I am'. In the following interview excerpt, Minna returned to her first dominance experiences and reflected on how they related to her sadism today:

> I think I was 12 years old when a neighbour boy, who was four years older than me, invited me to his bedroom and wanted to look at my breasts. I told him that if you get undressed and start jerking off, then okay, maybe. And as he sat there, I felt 'wow, what power'! He was looking at

> my breasts, but he did not touch them, and I went home and felt quite happy. And this was nothing I had seen or read. I was only 12! But I probably wouldn't have become a sadist if it wasn't inside me from the beginning. It's not something you decide to be. I was in my early teens when I went to the library and looked up s/m and was told it is a disease and that sadists should be imprisoned. I just thought no, that is not me.

Like many of the other practitioners' reflections, this quote by Minna represents a view on BDSM as something innate, or something that 'has always been there'. Another informant, Magnus, remarked: 'There tends to be a dividing line between those who say they always knew, that even when you were a child and had no sexual experience, you knew. And I belong to that group'. For people with this attitude, the first meeting with a BDSM community is often associated with a feeling of 'coming home'. To understand that there are others like yourself, or as Magnus put it: 'to fall into each other's arms, where there is finally someone who understands'. Many described the feeling as one where 'everything falls into place', where you are allowed to be yourself and express all parts and aspects of yourself.

Another group of practitioners was those who first encountered a BDSM community and subsequently became involved. They were often introduced in adulthood, for example through a new partner. According to Minna, a desire for BDSM is something possible to learn. She described how she 'plants a desire for physical pain in her partner' and said: 'It wasn't there when we met, but I influenced him to think it's awesome and something he needs'.

Several practitioners described their practice as a form of dependency. Natalie said: 'The more BDSM you get, the more you need, it's the strongest need I've ever encountered. It is stronger than anything else. You become addicted after the first spank on the butt. You must have more and more'. At one of attended meetings where BDSM were discussed, this issue came up. One woman said that she knew several people who do not admit their BDSM interests but suffer from a kind of 'pressure' that makes them practise BDSM full-time for a few weeks every year. They contact her to be dominated or buy quantities of BDSM stuff and shut themselves away for days on end to watch BDSM porn or hang out on Darkside.se to get their needs satisfied. Then, they go back to 'normal life', and life goes on as usual – until next time. Everyone at the meeting felt it was sad to repress BDSM like that. Adam too compared his practice to an addiction:

> When I came to this conclusion that I'm kinky, I tried to repress it when I was younger (...), then I went cold turkey on everything, just shut down everything and it went well for eight, nine months. Then I started feeling so bad. I didn't know what to do. I asked myself: 'What am I doing'? I was so depressed and I didn't know what to do with myself.

It is worth noting here that Adam used the term 'cold turkey' to describe his experience, a term generally used to describe abruptly stopping the use of an addictive drug, which makes the abstinence intense and powerful. He continued, 'Since then, I [have] realised that BDSM is a part of my life which I can't live without. I have to establish my life in line with that, so to speak'. He explained that when he has not been practising for a while, he felt bad. At the time of the interview, it had been several months since he last had a session:

> Since the end of January, I have felt that my body needs a BDSM fix, needs to let go. I have considered going to a dominatrix in Denmark, who I know is good, but I felt no, I can't risk it. I do not know how I would manage to deal with it later. I don't want to be alone with my feelings. For example, I moved my summer vacation, so I could go to the United States and I will be there in three weeks and then I can play as much as I like. Then it will be time to get back to earth and become normal again.

There are numerous drug metaphors in this excerpt from the interview with Adam. He knows that the body needs to 'dope BDSM' and he has dedicated time and space to devote himself to practise for a longer period. He also takes into account that it takes time to reconnect with his regular life and 'become normal' again.

The kind of language found in the interviews is by no means exceptional. To use the term addiction in connection with sexuality has become more common, especially in relation to pornography. According to Williams et al. (2017), there has been a growing acceptance among some academics, professionals, policymakers and media regarding the concept of addiction to sex and/or pornography, although research highlights serious problems with applying an addiction model to sexual behaviour and pornography viewing. Although several informants in this study used the language of addiction to describe their BDSM practices, it is important to point out that BDSM has not been scientifically established as an addiction. In this context, the use of addiction and drug metaphors can rather be seen as a way to find suitable words to describe what one is feeling; by using a language that belongs to a drug discourse, one can make oneself understood because it has intelligibility, and a common significance for people outside the community. In this sense, Cameron and Kulick (2003) describe the meaning of language, in making ourselves and our actions understandable:

> Language – used about anything – is not a perfect representation of experience or reality. But because humans are not able to read each other's minds or experience each other's bodily sensations, we depend on language to communicate (or dissemble) what we think and feel and want.

In Taylor and Ussher's (2001, 310) interview study, one practitioner says: 'We have not got the language to describe what's going on', something that is evident among the practitioners also in this study. Often, informants look for suitable words to describe what they are experiencing or use metaphors from other discursive arenas to explain how it feels.

Conclusion

Plummer (1995, 33) argues that sexual stories are often similar to each other and states that 'there is a self-consciousness at work here which scans the past life for clues to one's sexual being'. He describes the preoccupation of searching in newspapers and books, and among experts to find clarity and understanding, as well as looking back in childhood to find answers and meaning.

BDSM includes a wide range of meanings, motives and experiences. My intention in this paper has been not to highlight certain experiences as more true or genuine than others but to explore how practitioners, through their stories, create themselves and make sense of their experiences. BDSM is widely misunderstood by the general public. It is my hope that this study, with its focus on becoming and desire in relation to BDSM, can help illuminate the reasons why people choose to engage in these types of activities and that this understanding might lead to greater acceptance.

A recurring basis for discussion among the practitioners interviewed is whether BDSM is best understood as an interest, a desire, a lifestyle or an orientation. Instead, by seeing BDSM as a process of becoming enabled through flows of desire, the practice does not need to be reduced to either something one *is* or something one *does*. According to Deleuze and Guattari ([1987] 2012), sexuality is something that passes through and beyond us, not an instinct we have. It follows that practising BDSM can be understood as a process of increasing

expansion, creation and connection, whereby desire is seen not as something we lack or need but as a process of striving and self-enhancement.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Charlotta Carlström http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1520-9838

References

Almqvist, C. J. L. (1839) 2012. *Det Går An* (It Will Do). Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag.
Baker, A. C. 2016. "Sacred Kink: Finding Psychological Meaning at the Intersection of BDSM and Spiritual Experience." *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*: 1–14. doi:10.1080/14681994.2016.1205185
Barker, M. 2013. "Gender and BDSM Revisited. Reflections on a Decade of Researching Kink Communities." *Psychology of Women Section Review* 15 (2): 20–28.
Barker, M., A. Iantaffi, and C. Gupta. 2007. "Kinky Clients, Kinky Counselling? The Challenges and Potentials of BDSM." In *Feeling Queer or Queer Feelings: Counselling and Sexual Cultures*, edited by L. Moon, 106–124. London: Routledge.
Beckmann, A. 2001. "Deconstructing Myths: The Social Construction of 'Sadomasochism' versus 'Subjugated Knowledges' of Practitioners of Consensual 'SM'." *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 8 (2): 66–95.
Cameron, D., and D. Kulick. 2003. *Language and Sexuality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Carlström, C. 2016. "BDSM – Paradoxernas Praktiker (BDSM–The Practices of Paradoxes)." PhD diss., University of Malmö.
Carlström, C. 2017. "Gender Equal BDSM Practice – A Swedish Paradox?" *Psychology & Sexuality* 8 (4): 268–279.
Carlström, C. 2018. "BDSM, Interaction Rituals and Open Bodies." *Sexuality & Culture* 22 (1): 209–219.
Colebrook, C. 2002. *Understanding Deleuze*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
Deleuze, G. 1990. *The Logic of Sense*. Columbia, SC: Columbia University Press.
Deleuze, G., and F. Guattari. (1972) 1983. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press.
Deleuze, G., and F. Guattari. (1987) 2012. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.
Faccio, E., C. Casini, and S. Cipolletta. 2014. "Forbidden Games: The Construction of Sexuality and Sexual Pleasure by BDSM 'Players'." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 16 (7): 752–764.
Foucault, M. (1979) 2002. *The History of Sexuality. Vol One*. London: Allen Lane.
Gebhard, P. 1969. "Fetishism and Sadomasochism." In *Dynamics of Deviant Sexuality*, edited by J. H. Masserman, 71–80. New York: Grune and Stratton.
Kleinplatz, P., and C. Moser. 2007. "Is SM Pathological?" In *Safe, Sane and Consensual. Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, edited by D. Langdrigde and M. Barker, 55–62. New York: Palgrave Mac-Millan.
Klement, K. R., E. M. Lee, J. K. Ambler, S. A. Hanson, E. Comber, D. Wietting, M. F. Wagner, et al. 2016. "Extreme Rituals in a BDSM Context: The Physiological and Psychological Effects of the 'Dance of Souls'." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 19 (4): 453–469.
Langdridge, D. 2011. "The Time of the Sadomasochist: Hunting with(in) the 'Tribus'." In *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*, edited by S. Seidman, N. Fischer, and C. Meeks, 372–380. New York: Routledge.
Langdridge, D., and M. Barker. 2007. "Situating sadomasochism." In *Safe, Sane and Consensual. Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, edited by D. Langdrigde and M. Barker, 3–9. New York: Palgrave Mac-Millan.

Moser, C., and P. Kleinplatz. 2006. "Introduction: The State of our Knowledge on SM." *Journal of Homosexuality* 2 (3): 1–15.
Newmahr, S. 2011. *Playing on the Edge Sadomasochism, Risk and Intimacy*. Indiana, IN: Indiana University Press.
Ortmann, D., and R. Sprott. 2013. *Sexual Outsiders: Understanding BDSM Sexualities and Communities*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
Plummer, K. 1995. *Telling Sexual Stories*. London: Routledge.
Prior, E. E., and D. J. Williams. 2015. "Does BDSM Power Exchange among Women reflect Casual Leisure? An Exploratory Study." *Journal of Positive Sexuality* 1 (1): 12–15.
Richters, J., R. O. De Visser, C. E. Rissel, A. E. Grulich, and A. M. A. Smith. 2008. "Demographic and Psychosocial Features of Participants in Bondage and Discipline, 'Sadomasochism' or Dominance and Submission (BDSM): Data from a National Survey." *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 5 (7): 1660–1668.
Sagarin, B. J., E. M. Lee, and K. R Klement. 2015. "Sadomasochism without Sex? Exploring the Parallels between BDSM and Extreme Rituals." *Journal of Positive Sexuality* 1 (3): 32–36.
Sandnabba, N. K., P. Santilla, L. Alison, and N. Nordling. 2002. "Demographics, Sexual Behavior, Family Background and Abuse Experiences of Practitioners of Sadomasochistic Sex: A review of Recent Research." *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 17 (1): 39–55.
Taylor, G., and J. Ussher. 2001. "Making Sense of S&M: A Discourse Analytic Account." *Sexualities* 4 (3): 293–314.
Weinberg, T. 2006. "Sadomasochism and the Social Sciences: A Review of the Sociological and Social Psychological Literature." *Journal of Homosexuality* 50 (2/3): 17–40.
Weiss, M. 2011. *Techniques of Pleasure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Westerfelhaus, R. G. 2007. "The Spirituality of Sex and the Sexuality of the Spirit. BDSM Erotic Play as Soulwork and Social Critique." In *Sexuality & Communication in Everyday Life*, edited by K. E Lovaas and M. M. Jenkins, 265– 279. London: SAGE.
Williams, D. J. 2006. "Different (Painful!) Strokes for Different Folks: A General Overview of Sexual Sadomasochism and its Diversity." *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* 13 (4): 333–346.
Williams, D. J., E. E. Prior, T. Alvarado, J. N. Thomas, and M. C. Christensen. 2016. "Is Bondage, Dominance and Submission, and Sadomasochism Recreational Leisure? A Descriptive Exploratory Investigation." *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 13 (7): 1091–1094.
Williams, D. J., J. N. Thomas, E. E. Prior, C. Amezquita, and D. Hall. 2017. "Social Work Practice with Clients that Enjoy Participation in Consensual BDSM: Identifying and Applying Strengths." *Journal of Positive Sexuality* 3 (1): 12–20.
Wismeijer, A. A. J., and M. A. L. M. van Assen. 2013. "Psychological Characteristics of BDSM Practitioners." *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* 10 (8): 1943–1952.
Yost, M. 2007. "Sexual Fantasies of S/M Practitioners: The Impact of Gender and S/M Role on Fantasy Content." In *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*, edited by D. Langdridge and M. Barker, 135–154. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.